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Brained: Mentally impaired Raul Lopez was \$1.7 million richer as the result of an accident settlement -- until he joined the Church of Scientology.

By Ron Russell
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The ostrich eggs should have been a tip-off. But Raul Lopez wasn't worried, even though he had paid \$30,000 for two of them. The eggs were going to make him rich. After all, his lawyer, Brent Jones, whom he trusted more than his own mother, had convinced him. Jones came highly regarded as a member of the Church of Scientology, the Los Angeles-based church in which Lopez had invested his hope of getting cured of irreversible brain trauma resulting from an auto accident. Never mind that medical experts had concluded that little could be done about his nervous tremor and inability to reason and interact with others the way he did before a big-rig crossed the center line of a Ventura County highway and slammed head-on into his pickup truck in 1985.

Without exception, doctors advised him to adapt to his limitations and move on with his life. But that was before Lopez, 34, stumbled upon a Scientology booth at a Ventura County flea market. The Scientologists, he concluded, had what he wanted. "They were going to make me whole again," he recalls once believing, referring to the technology as well as the expensive training known as auditing that are the mainstays of Scientology's late founder, science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard.

According to attorneys Dan Leipold and Ford Greene, Lopez also had something the Scientologists wanted: \$1.7 million that was their client's share of the court settlement stemming from the accident. As part of a potentially explosive case wending its way toward trial in Los Angeles superior court -- in which L.A. Police Commission President Gerald Chaleff is among the battery of lawyers representing the church -- Lopez's attorneys contend that the church and individuals associated with it swindled their brain-damaged client out of up to \$1.3 million. "They picked him clean, and we have the documentation to prove it," Leipold says.

For their part, Scientology lawyers deny that there was any wrongdoing, portraying Lopez as a willing participant during years of involvement in the church. Robert Amidon, a Burbank attorney who is among the legal team representing the church, calls Lopez's claim "bogus," [characterizing the case](#) (scheduled for trial next May) as an attack on [religious expression](#): "It's as if Lopez [were Catholic and] were to say, 'Please stop all confessionals in the Catholic Church because it hurts my brain to listen to the priest.'"

Regardless of the outcome, the case provides a rare glimpse into the controversial church's internal operations and associated commercial enterprises, including alleged hardball tactics it is accused of employing to promote Hubbard's teachings for maximum profit. Critics, including former members, have long asserted that Scientology resembles a sprawling collection of business enterprises more than a religion and say it is controlled by an unincorporated paramilitary- like organization known as the Sea Organization, or Sea Org. "It's a seamless structure that has made the enterprise of Scientology and its individual components almost impregnable and immune from liability judgments," says Leipold, who has frequently battled the church in court. "We think this case is going to make that abundantly clear." Leaving aside its structure and practice, which have prompted attempts at governmental intervention in France and Germany, Scientology beliefs have also fueled controversy.

Founded by Hubbard in 1952, Scientology teaches that people are immortal spiritual beings, called thetans, who were banished to earth some 75 million years ago by an evil galactic ruler named Xenu. A pulp fiction writer who had [served in the Navy](#), Hubbard hit it big in 1950 by coming up with the concept of [Dianetics, which he dubbed a modern science of mental health](#). [Dianetics](#) remains at the core of Scientology practice. One of its staples is a simplified lie detector called an [E-meter](#), which is supposed to measure electrical changes in the skin while subjects discuss intimate details of their lives. Scientologists swear by it, among them actors [John Travolta](#), Tom Cruise, and [Kirstie Alley](#), jazzman [Chick Corea](#), and soul singer Isaac Hayes. Hubbard believed that [unhappiness sprang from mental aberrations](#), called engrams, and that counseling sessions with the [E-meter](#) could help get rid of them. Scientologists refer to the extensive (and expensive) process of clearing the mind in order for this to occur as "auditing." But it was another kind of auditing in the 1970s, conducted by the Internal Revenue Service, that raised suspicions that the church has had trouble dispelling. The IRS accused Hubbard of skimming millions of dollars from the church, laundering it through dummy corporations, and stashing it in Swiss bank accounts. What's more, [FBI raids](#) on Scientology offices in Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., uncovered plans to take over parts of the federal government.

Hubbard died before the case was adjudicated, but his wife and 10 other former church leaders, whom Scientology leaders have since portrayed as a rogue group within the church infrastructure, [went to prison](#) in the early 1980s after they were convicted of [stealing government documents](#) to cover up church activities. Since then, the church has been embroiled in [numerous lawsuits](#), usually brought by former members claiming abuses, and has spent millions of dollars defending itself, often successfully. What makes the Lopez case different to most, his lawyers contend, is that not only did Lopez exhibit diminished capacity during years of surrendering huge sums to the church and

its affiliated entities, but that his Scientology handlers were well aware of his condition after having obtained copies of his medical and psychiatric records.

One psychiatrist who examined Lopez after he was injured and reexamined him last year found that he was "damaged [by the accident] intellectually, damaged interpersonally, and damaged with regard to his emotionality." Dr. Leonard Diamond's report, a copy of which was obtained by New Times, concluded that the auditing Lopez received from the church provided "absolutely no benefit," adding, "In fact, the data strongly point to the fact that these experiences have served to create additional disturbance so that [Lopez] has reached a point at which he is barely functioning." Contends Greene, Lopez's lawyer, "With Raul, it was like shooting fish in a barrel.... In a sense, [the Scientologists] passed him around the way the Hell's Angels might pass around a teenage girl."

By all accounts, Raul Lopez should be dead. After viewing what was left of his mangled pickup truck following the horrible early- morning collision in August 1985, which left him disabled, even his mother has a hard time reconciling how he survived. "[The truck] looked like a smashed soda can ready to recycle," Alicia Lopez recalls. "That it never exploded was some kind of miracle."

It took an emergency crew using the jaws of life more than an hour to extricate the unconscious Lopez from the wreckage. At the time, Lopez was 19 and had the world on a string. After graduating from Channel Islands High School in Oxnard the previous year, he had spent six months in naval training in San Diego, and had just enlisted in the U.S. Navy Reserves at nearby Port Hueneme. With rugged good looks, he was popular and studious in high school, lettering in basketball and playing drums in the marching band. His career ambition was to be an architect or an engineer. But first, family members say, Lopez wanted to satisfy a long-held fascination with ships and the military. After coming home from San Diego, he took a job with a company that services swimming pools in order to save money for college in the fall. Lopez doesn't remember the accident. His last precrash recollection is driving en route to an appointment to clean a pool near the community of Fillmore.

The accident happened in an instant. The big-rig's 18-year-old driver, who wasn't seriously injured, dozed off momentarily, long enough for his truck to veer onto the wrong side of county Route 126 and into Lopez's path. Lopez's recovery was long and grueling. He spent seven months in hospitals before being released to begin physical therapy to help him walk again. While undergoing therapy in the summer of 1987 he hobbled into the swap meet held at a former outdoor movie theater near Oxnard, where for the first time he encountered Scientologists.

Using a cane to get around, he stopped to rest in front of a booth advertising Dianetics. A woman attending the booth struck up a conversation, and Lopez accepted her offer to receive a free personality test. A few days later, he was contacted by Jim Hamre, a local Scientology registrar, whom he says told him the test results indicated that Scientology principles could, indeed, help him with his mental and emotional distress, as well as get rid of his tremor. Hamre signed him up for a bundle of Scientology services, including auditing. "They told me they had what I needed; that if I followed the program I could be cured of the tremor, and I could be my old self again, which is all I ever

wanted," says Lopez, echoing a main contention of his lawsuit. During Hamre's visit, the registrar made repeated inquiries as to how much money Lopez had in the bank, how much interest it earned, and how Lopez could gain access to it, Lopez says.

Although he was aware that he possessed a large sum of money, Lopez says, he had left the details of his finances to his mother. Alicia Lopez's name was listed jointly with that of her son on each of their several bank accounts. Her signature was not required in order for Raul Lopez to obtain funds from the joint accounts. Alicia Lopez says she became curious as to why her son began asking her, up to five times a day, how much money he had. But she says she thought little of it until the week after Hamre's visit, when Raul let it slip that he had given money to the Church of Scientology. When she asked him how much, he implied the amount was \$3,000. "I really hit the roof," she recalls. "I said, 'Raul, those people can't do anything for you. They're just out after your money.' In the end I thought, oh well, his losing \$3,000 wasn't the end of the world." But during an emotional confrontation in his parents' living room several days later, Raul Lopez acknowledged that he had really given the Scientologists \$30,000. The next day, Alicia Lopez stormed into the church's Buenaventura Mission in Oxnard and, accusing Hamre and others of taking advantage of her son's vulnerable mental state, angrily demanded that the money be returned. Church representatives refunded about \$28,500 and let Raul Lopez know they never wanted to see him again. Leipold, the Lopez attorney, contends that the people from the church knew from the outset that their new recruit was a millionaire. And, Leipold contends, church officials were also well aware of his client's condition, having with Lopez's cooperation obtained his medical and psychiatric records.

That Lopez had ever been permitted to manage his newfound riches without supervision was the result of a separate injustice, his attorneys say. Following the accident, Alicia Lopez had turned to a lawyer named Michael Haley to prosecute the personal injury lawsuit on her son's behalf. Haley obtained the opinions of several medical experts, including Dr. Charles Fretheim, a neuropsychologist, who concluded that Lopez was incompetent to act responsibly on his own behalf. Fretheim strongly recommended that a conservator be appointed. Yet Lopez and his mother say that Haley never discussed the doctor's recommendation with them, and never pressed for the appointment of a conservator. Thus, when Lopez's personal injury claim was settled for \$2.5 million, there was no mechanism in place to prevent him from accessing the funds, even though family members say he was not competent to manage money.

Haley was later disbarred, and a judge ultimately appointed Alicia Lopez as conservator. But the lawsuit contends that Raul Lopez was without a conservator at the time Alicia Lopez marched out of the Scientology mission, cashier's check in hand, believing that she had succeeded in snatching him away from financial predators. Not until many months later did she learn that within weeks of giving him back the money and booting him out of the church, Scientologists were again on his trail. Without her knowledge, they had once more persuaded Raul Lopez to buy expensive church literature, courses, and auditing as his best chance of regaining his pre-accident mental and emotional condition. Only this time, the lawsuit maintains, church officials told him that the only way they would allow him to return to Scientology was if he kept it secret from his family.

Lopez cut off all meaningful contact with his parents and sister, convinced that they were "suppressive," the term Scientologists use to describe outsiders deemed to be opposed to Hubbard's teachings. His mother says her son "drifted off in his own direction, gradually separating himself from us almost entirely.... He would talk to us but it was on a superficial level, and he let us know that any discussion about Scientology was off-limits." She and her husband, Elaiser Lopez (a quiet retired ranch worker who defers to his wife in speaking publicly about their son), say they didn't learn until 1997 that Raul's assets were depleted. "He finally came to me one day and said, "Mom, there's no more money in the bank."

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